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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR  
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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000399

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS AND PRM/ANE -- ERICA THIBAUT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/16/2018  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [MY](#)  
SUBJECT: IMMIGRATION DETAINEES RIOT AFTER RELA BEATS  
PRISONERS

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 58 - EMBASSY RAISES RELA WITH  
IMMIGRATION  
[1](#)B. 07 KUALA LUMPUR 1659 - UNHCR WARY OF ROLE FOR  
RELA IN DETENTION CENTERS

Classified By: POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF MARK D. CLARK, REASON 1.4 (B AND  
D).

Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Some 60 to 70 detained suspected illegal immigrants rioted at Lenggeng Immigration Detention Center (IDC) on April 21, setting fire to the temporary administration building according to press and firsthand accounts. Malaysia's Head of Immigration Enforcement claimed the riot started after the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refused the refugees' applications for resettlement, an allegation denied by UNHCR. Based on multiple witnesses' accounts, the riot's catalyst was the severe beatings of detainees by Immigration Officers and People's Volunteer Corps (RELA) members assigned as guards to Lenggeng. The Malaysian Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) told us deplorable conditions, overcrowding and alleged abuses by RELA all contributed to the riot. We continue to express concern to the GOM regarding RELA's increased authority over immigration enforcement. End Summary.

RELA Guards Overcrowded Facilities  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Lenggeng IDC is one of 17 IDCs in Malaysia. Formerly operated by the Prisons Department, the IDCs are now responsibility of the Immigration Department, which lacks sufficient personnel and therefore uses RELA, a government-sponsored public security auxiliary force, to guard the facilities (ref A and B). Besides providing security, RELA members also arrest suspected illegal immigrants for a bounty. The Lenggeng facility is severely overcrowded. Siva Subramaniam, a commissioner for SUHAKAM, informed poloffs the camp currently holds 1,090 prisoners, including seven children and about 280 women. Building tensions between the detainees and their guards came to a head on April 21 when some 60 - 70 detainees rioted and set fire to a temporary administration building.

Witnesses Tell Their Stories  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) Poloffs met with two Burmese refugees formerly detained at Lenggeng on May 6. They related that on or about March 31, Immigration and RELA guards accused a group of Burmese and Indonesians of smoking in camp and allegedly punished the group with a beating. On April 20, after more cigarettes were found, Immigration officers beat an Indonesian and a Pakistani detainee. One refugee described how the officers struck the men on the soles of their feet

and along their shins, and administered electric shocks. The Pakistani detainee reportedly cried out for help during his beating and, unable to walk, tried to crawl away until another detainee was ordered to drag the injured man back to the detention block. Other detainees became agitated and demanded to speak with the senior Immigration Officer. (Note: A local NGO informed poloffs that officials took the man to Seremban Hospital for treatment. End note.) A RELA officer told detainees they could express their concerns the following morning.

14. (C) According to the two Burmese refugees, the riot broke out the following morning after detainees realized they would not get to speak with the senior officer. The initial disruption involved detainees from two blocks destroying the interiors of those facilities. Both Immigration and RELA guards, totaling about 30-40 officers, fled and took up positions at the camp's perimeter. After detainees broke through the blocks' doors, a group set fire to the temporary administration building. Several detainees attempted to flee the compound, but guards at the outer gate stopped them. Police, fire, and other security teams regained control and quelled the fire. A number of detainees (including six Indonesians, five Burmese, a Vietnamese, and a Cambodian) were taken to the Seremban police station for questioning. (Note: This account tracks closely with accounts provided to the UNHCR and another local NGO from sources within the camp. End note.)

Immigration Blames UNHCR  
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15. (SBU) Ishak Mohamed, Head of Immigration Enforcement, quickly blamed the UNHCR for the riot. He told international press that rioters "were disappointed" after hearing that UNHCR could not place them in a third country. However, the UNHCR quickly denied this, issuing a statement that "no news was delivered to the refugees that their resettlement requests had been denied." (Note: UNHCR counted 75 refugees and asylum seekers detained at Lenggeng during the riot. All but seven refugees are Chin-Burmese. End note.) Despite UNHCR's clarification, the government-influenced mainstream media continued to maintain that UNHCR's denial of resettlement provoked the riot. (Note: On some other immigration matters, Ishak continues to be accessible and helpful to the U.S. Mission. End Note.)

SUHAKAM Commissioner Describes Lenggeng  
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16. (C) Poloffs met with SUHAKAM Commissioner Siva Subramaniam on April 25, the day after he personally visited Lenggeng. He described prisoners living in severely overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. About 280 women are detained in an isolated section of the camp and do not receive adequate medical care, including provision of sanitary napkins. He approached NGOs, such as Tenaganita, to obtain basic essentials for the women. He told us conditions in other IDCs are similar to Lenggeng. He believes overcrowding and harsh treatment by RELA contributed to the riot. Siva also noted severe understaffing at the IDCs, adding that only about 40 of the authorized 208 officer slots at Lenggeng are manned. Prior to the riot, Siva claims he warned Immigration officials that the IDCs were "powder kegs" needing urgent reforms to deal with the growing burden. Siva wants to hold a roundtable with RELA, Home Ministry, Immigration, and the Prison Department to discuss possible solutions to the underlying problems, such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, and detained children. Our May 6 interview with two former detainees at Lenggeng reinforced Siva's description of the IDC's harsh conditions.

Comment  
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17. (C) The riot occurred during the same week the Home Ministry proposed elevating RELA to a formal government agency. Immigration and RELA detain suspected illegal immigrants at a rate that outstrips Malaysia's current willingness and ability to expeditiously process deportations. Siva noted that some of the detainees have languished at Lenggeng for almost 1 1/2 years. Post continues to express our concerns about RELA in contacts with government officials, including Immigration.

KEITH